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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MOSCOW 002659

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SUBJECT: LOCAL PUNDITS ON RUSSIA'S ESCALATING RHETORIC

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Daniel Russell. Reasons: 1.4(B/D)

11. (C) Summary: The latest Russian rhetoric against U.S. missile defense plans, in conjunction with last week's missile testing, is read by both pro-Kremlin and liberal analysts as further evidence of Putin's continued frustration with U.S.-Russian relations. They argue that the combative tone reflects the litany of grievances that triggered Putin's February remarks in Munich. In explaining the latest outbursts, experts focus on the election year benefits of America bashing, as well as on rejection of the U.S. rationale for missile defense and conspiracy theories about the U.S. driving "new" Europe's assertiveness in EU-Russian relations. Criticism and suspicion of U.S. intentions is, however, not limited to the Kremlin. Former PM Gaidar told us that U.S. MD will always be viewed as offensive, potentially destabilizing weapons; forty-five percent of those recently polled by Russian Newsweek consider the U.S. a "hostile" country. Given the emphasis Putin places on his relationship with the President, most believe that the Kennebunkport visit provides the best opportunity to lower the rhetoric and to reinforce areas of agreement, while addressing sharpening areas of disagreement on European security architecture, Kosovo, and democracy. End Summary.

Drumbeat of Criticism

12. (SBU) Russia's May 29 testing of new generation cruise (R-500) and intercontinental ballistic missiles (RS-24) has been accompanied by a steady drumbeat of criticism over U.S. missile defense plans, including Putin's comments from a pre-G8 Summit interview declaring that Russia would have to weigh targeting MD sites in Europe. Putin has asserted that the tests were a direct response to U.S. MD plans and NATO members' "non-compliance" with the A/CFE Treaty. In a May 29 press conference following a meeting with Portuguese PM Socrates, he warned that U.S. MD plans were threatening to turn Europe into a "powder keg." Later, he warned against the "diktat and imperialism" by "certain members" of the international community. First Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov and MOD Anatoliy Serduykov got their licks in as well -- the latter compared U.S. MD plans to mining Russia's "apartment door," while FM Lavrov dismissed U.S. assurances on missile defense as "laughable."

13. (C) Political commentators attribute the harsh Kremlin spin to continued frustration with the U.S., which generated Putin's rhetorical blast in Munich. Kremlin-connected political consultants Vyacheslav Nikonov and Sergey Markov separately told us that Putin was "just sick and tired" of the perceived accumulated slights and ticked off missile

defense, Secretary Gates' testimony placing Russia and North Korea in the same threat category, U.S. criticism over Russian efforts to transition Belarus to market prices for gas, and Western failure to condemn Estonia's removal of the Soviet-era WW2 monument as feeding this anger. Fedor Lukyanov, the liberal editor of "Russia in Global Affairs," agreed and noted that from Putin's perspective, Russia did everything to "help" the U.S. post-9/11, including opening up Central Asia for coalition anti-terrorism efforts, but had expected something in return. What the Kremlin wanted, liberal defense expert Aleksey Arbatov told us, was respect for Russia's "legitimate interests." The Kremlin's complaint, Lukyanov reprised, was that Russia instead was confronted with NATO expansion, zero-sum competition in Georgia and Ukraine, and U.S. military installations in Russia's backyard. This perceived abuse of Russian cooperation, coupled with U.S. "triumphalism," continued to aggravate the leadership, according to public relations adviser to First Deputy Prime Minister Ivanov, Sergey Zverev. All underscored to us that for Putin and his inner circle, the U.S. "uses" Russia for its own ends but returns nothing.

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MD: Continuing Target

¶4. (C) The Russian leadership continues to reject the threat analysis that drives U.S. missile defense plans and remains deeply distrustful of U.S. long-term intentions and "break-out" capacity. Former Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar recalled in a dinner last week with us that the Moscow ABM system, which consisted of missiles armed with nuclear warheads, could easily be switched from a defensive system to an offensive system. This knowledge made it impossible for

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the U.S. to persuade the Russians that the same could not easily be done with interceptors based in Poland. Gaidar added that Russia will always view these interceptors as potentially offensive, forward-based weapons, which could cause a dangerous destabilization in the strategic balance because of their ability to be launched and reach western Russia in a matter of minutes. Inspections would not necessarily be reassuring.

¶5. (C) Efforts to cast the test launches of the ballistic and cruise missiles as a direct response to a recent, U.S.-induced arms race reflect the Kremlin's focus on raising alarms over U.S. plans. However, military experts dismiss Putin's offered rationale and tell us that these long-planned tests merely signaled Moscow's pragmatic decision to move forward on force modernization. However, Kremlin friendly observers claim that the testing schedules were advanced in order to make the point that five years after the U.S. abrogation of the ABM Treaty, Russia was in a position to push back, with Putin characterizing the development as "retaliation" for the "tough and absolutely unjustified unilateral steps by our partners."

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New Sights: EU and New Europe

¶6. (C) MD is not the only area of Russian complaints about U.S. policy. According to Nikonov and Markov, some of the anger towards the U.S. is generated by developments in the Russia-EU relationship. Quoting Putin's line that the "caravan can only move as fast as the slowest wagon," Nikonov accused the U.S. of working through Poland and the Baltics to stymie the new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement negotiations and to set "new" Europe against Russia's "old" partners. Dismissing Russian liberals' critiques of the GOR's misadventures in the "near abroad" and inability to forge healthy relations with the Baltics, Nikonov attributed Poland's refusal to participate in Track 2 diplomacy or to answer the correspondence of FM Lavrov on the meat dispute as an example of U.S. encouragement of misbehavior. Whether it was Poland, the Baltics, Georgia, or Ukraine, Markov charged,

the U.S. played the role of puppeteer.

Factoring in Domestic Politics and Elections

17. (C) Many believe that an obsessive focus on succession, combined with dissatisfaction over the state of U.S.-Russian relations, helps fuel anti-Western rhetoric. Russia's neither fully democratic nor fully dictatorial system created a shaky and fragile transitional situation, Lukyanov argued, in which every move from the outside was viewed as a threat that could influence the outcome. Ekho Moskvyy Editor Aleksey Venediktov told us that the rhetoric was intimately tied to succession politics. The United States, he argued, had replaced the oligarchs as the "enemy" around which Russian voters could unite. While Venediktov believed the ferocity of the Kremlin's attacks was artificial, he stressed that the underlying anger towards the United States was real and -- based on the response to his radio station's programming -- resonated well with Russians.

18. (C) Both pro-Kremlin and pro-Western analysts confirm that the anti-U.S. message is a popular one, with the major political parties all falling in line, and a general political consensus having formed around the desirability and need for a resurgent Russia to play a more assertive role internationally. While Nikonov rejected any linkage between Putin's foreign policy and the upcoming elections, arguing that with popularity readings at a firm 80 percent and trending upwards there was little Putin had to fear, he acknowledged that the message played to the sentiments of a majority of Russians. (Note: Polls published in the Russian edition of Newsweek show 45 percent of Russians consider the U.S. a "hostile" country.) Foreign policy adviser to the Kremlin-sanctioned Just Russia opposition party, Mikhail Demurin, noted to us that Putin's unchallenged popularity and fin-de-regime status allowed him to say what many Russians feel when they catalogue the recent behavior of the United States. Defense analyst Arbatov told us that Putin's primary motivation was not to play to the crowd, but to shore up his legacy. The message is simple: Russia is back and demands its due. Putin does not seek a new Cold War, but rather is making a plea for respect, with the hope that the West will listen and heed Russia's concerns.

Comment

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19. (C) This cycle of rhetoric notwithstanding, Putin continues to characterize the United States as a "friend," to dismiss anti-Americanism as harmful, and to reiterate his respect and friendship for the President. Most here agree that the July 1-2 Kennebunkport visit, and the friendly and informal setting it will provide, offers the best opportunity to lower the rhetoric, to reinforce our areas of common agreement, and to better define how to address our sharpening differences on European security architecture, Kosovo, and Russia's democratic evolution.
RUSSELL